

Mayor's Annual Message, January 7, 2004, Rye City Hall

The Mayor's Annual Message delivered by Rye Mayor Steve Otis at the January 7th meeting of the Rye City Council.

One hundred years ago the leaders of Rye came together to create the Village of Rye. By 1904 Rye had evolved into a community whose needs could not be addressed by the Town government. In that era, the town form of government in New York State was not authorized to provide the same services that an incorporated village could provide. The Town of Rye, of which we were an unincorporated part, devoted itself to agricultural issues and did not provide the services needed by our growing community. Neighboring village governments in Port Chester, incorporated in 1868, and Mamaroneck, incorporated in 1895, provided their citizens with a fuller set of services essential to evolving residential communities.

What we now know of as Rye had become a community in need of those same services and in need of a local government that represented our unique interests. 1904 culminated years of research and planning to create a village. One hundred years ago sixty-one community leaders petitioned for the creation of the Village of Rye.

With a change in state law enabling Rye to qualify as a village, 1904 saw the establishment of our village government during the course of the year. The volunteer leadership of our community laid the foundation for the Rye of the last century.

One hundred years later, what would the residents of Rye of 1904 find? What became of their experiment in this place we call Rye?

They would find a unique, carefully planned, attractively developed, small town community that thrives on our location on the water, our proximity to the world around us, and our exceptional sense of connection to each other.

Our local government, first as a village, and then since 1942 as a City, has worked hard to plan Rye's evolution and growth and protect the aesthetic character of the Rye we enjoy today.

We value our natural surroundings and continue to protect these community resources. We value our links to our neighbors, to the Hudson Valley, New York City, New England, the Northeast, the Nation, and the world.

A year does not go by when Rye is not recognized as a sought-after place to live, bring up children, and call home. Survey after survey ranks Rye as one of the top communities in the nation. Our schools regularly score at the highest level of testing and academic success.

Our form of local government has served us well. We are served by an outstanding professional staff. To a person, our City Manager and Department Heads are recognized as leaders in their respective fields. The level of dedication in every City department is high. Through years of diligence, appreciation of professionalism, and a desire to provide the quality services for which residents have asked, we have inherited one of the best-run local governments in the nation.

The Village, established a century ago, placed a high value on the importance of volunteerism and public service. This tradition has been a hallmark of our local government and our countless not-for-profit organizations. At the end of 2003 the City of Rye had over 150 volunteer positions filled by individuals in service to the City of Rye government. This level of public participation is unprecedented in its volume and is unmatched in the special expertise that our residents bring to, or develop in, their areas of service.

Our not-for-profit organizations are also supported by hundreds of volunteers serving on boards, committees, and fundraising efforts. I do not believe you can find another community where the level of volunteer service matches the governmental and not-for-profit efforts in Rye.

Our City's fiscal strength also places us at the top of local governments. We are regularly recognized for excellence in financial management. We are one of a handful of local governments in the state to have the highest bond rating given. Our debt and reserve levels remain strong. In October the City received special recognition for the work of our Finance Department for early implementation of more comprehensive financial reporting standards.

Noteworthy is the fact that the City of Rye provides a high level of municipal services and yet our municipal tax rate remains among the lowest in Westchester County. In the mid-nineties press accounts noted the value Rye residents receive for their taxpayer dollar. A recent New York Times article provided a similar comparison.

Growth and progress have been vital to Rye's success. Rye has not stayed the same. Managing change has always been a challenge for any community that values what it has and fears losing what makes it unique. Through careful planning and public involvement over the generations, we have maintained our strength as a dynamic community and retained the historic character that we are so fortunate to inherit.

The leaders of Rye in 1904 can look at Rye today with pride. The experiment worked. They could look to the year just passed to see how we have continued to progress as a community.

The success of volunteer efforts and what I call the “collaborative process” continued to bring results for the community. Public participation, open government, and decision-making with an open mind always brings the best results. We again saw these principles at work in the successes of 2003.

The House Size to Lot Size Subcommittee worked closely with the City Planner, the Building Inspector, and the City Council to enable us to enact thoughtful, carefully drafted changes to our laws to restrain the few cases where the height, bulk, and size of proposed houses is dramatically out of scale with a neighborhood. At the same time we protected the normal construction and addition activity in the community. In 2003 very dedicated volunteers and staff sought to balance history and change to maintain the character of Rye.

The past year saw the construction of new athletic fields at Disbrow Park and Rye Nursery. When our Recreation Superintendent announces “play ball” later this year, it will be the result of a six year planning process that focused on public involvement and collaboration between volunteers in the Recreation Master Plan process and the City staff.

The new Rye Youth Advisory Committee has brought twenty-two bright, energetic, young Rye residents into the City government with early success. The Committee members bring fresh ideas and an ability to articulate issues facing teenagers in Rye. They will help the community become more responsive and will learn a lot about local government at the same time.

Traffic Safety improvements continued in 2003. Our Traffic and Transportation Committee continue to work on safety issues brought to their attention by residents. They then coordinate with the Police Department and the City Engineer on solutions. The City received AAA’s Gold Award for excellence in traffic safety in 2003.

The Rye Free Reading Room and the Rye YMCA are thriving with the opening of their new expanded facilities. These were successes for the entire community and were made possible through the volunteer efforts of each organization and the generosity of the people of Rye.

2003 brought the establishment of the Rye Beautification Advisory Committee, the continued work of the Rye Senior Advocacy Committee, and new projects from the Rye Merchant’s Association. These volunteer efforts add to the fabric of our community.

The Friends of the Rye Nature Center has taken great steps at rebuilding the environmental education programs of the community. We must encourage their efforts.

One of the historic pavilions at Rye Town Park was restored with private funds with the second to be completed this spring. The partnership with Seaside Johnnies has saved Rye taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars at Rye Town Park. In 2003 Rye Town Park was selected for listing on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. The Friends of Rye Town Park Duck Pond restoration is ready to begin.

Last January I proposed that a new not-for-profit be formed to assist the City with funding and expertise in the restoration of the Friends Meeting House on Milton Road. The Friends of the Rye Meeting House was formed in 2003 and will assist the City in a public/private partnership that brings together expertise from the Landmarks Advisory Committee, the Rye Historical Society, and other interested residents in an important project. This is another example of volunteer expertise, private fundraising, and working with City staff that makes projects in Rye succeed.

In 2003 our emergency service and public safety capabilities were again tested in the summer blackout. The preparation provided through our involvement in FEMA's Project Impact and our continued efforts to upgrade public safety and disaster preparedness were again demonstrated. Every City Department and involved City employee responded with skill. We must continue our efforts to be prepared for all challenges.

2003 brought continued success in addressing flooding and environmental concerns on Beaver Swamp Brook. The complex hydrological issues facing our border with Harrison have been studied, a plan is in place, and outside funding has been obtained to implement that plan in cooperation with the Town of Harrison.

Special thanks continues to go to Congresswoman Nita Lowey for her support in securing federal grant funding for this and other stormwater and environmental projects for the City of Rye.

Our environmental, wetland restoration, and land acquisition efforts could not have succeeded without the strong support of Governor Pataki and the state environmental agencies of his administration. Assemblyman Ron Tocci has also been successful in obtaining major grants to assist projects at the Rye Nature Center, the Rye Town Dock, and the Friends Meeting House property.

The outside financial support for projects in the City of Rye has been of tremendous benefit to Rye taxpayers. Since 1998 major grants, private partnerships, and governmental loans for local government projects, including Rye Town Park, have exceeded \$9 million. Tremendous time, effort, and planning went into making these funding sources accessible to Rye. However our community benefits when we can get projects done and qualify for outside funding that protects our taxpayers at the same time.

We must continue our efforts to secure outside governmental and private funding to meet community needs. Governmental grants, private partnerships, foundation funding, and tax deductible giving are not available for every project, but these avenues should be pursued aggressively if progress is to continue.

The new year brings challenges and work left undone.

While our municipal tax rates remain low compared with other Westchester communities, Westchester taxpayers are burdened with escalating local, school, and county taxes threatening the ability of many to remain in this county. The same economy that has been on a downturn since 2001 forces increased costs to all governments through retirement system payment increases, reduced revenues, and increased costs.

Controlling property taxes has been a priority of this community since the early 1990's. We must continue to make wise decisions about tax policies. We must continue our efforts to always be searching for more efficient ways to provide quality services.

We must also remember that there is a link between our consistently high property values and the fact that people choose Rye because we do provide quality services at a cost lower than anyone else.

We must properly maintain our buildings, roads, and equipment. As we have learned from past experience, to fail to do so is more costly to the taxpayer. Some of our biggest capital challenges are examples deferring big projects.

Our ability to provide dependable fire service throughout the entire City is linked to how we address the condition of the Locust Fire Headquarters. While a restored police station and courthouse facility is years away, some immediate improvements are needed. We need to work together to find a funding solution to rebuild Theall Road.

In December, we sought to address the funding needs of the Rye Free Reading Room through the budget process. We should not wait until the next budget cycle to build on that progress. In early 2004 we should begin a process to find ways to bring the library and the City organization closer together. Are there central services or expertise the City now provides City departments that could assist the library? A cooperative non-budget cycle evaluation of the financial needs of the library will bring long-term solutions and stability.

We are a great community that wants the initiatives of the community to be successful. Our goal on the City Council should be to assist those efforts. No community can afford to do everything at once. There is much work that has been left undone, and out of necessity that will always be the case. We are

constantly looking for ways to make Rye better. We need to continue to move forward and address our challenges in an orderly fashion.

We have a model local government that provides quality services in a cost-effective manner. Throughout the year we should continue our efforts at making it even more effective by looking for reorganization opportunities where they make sense. This has been our practice in the past and was reaffirmed in the budget process last year. But we should also avoid the temptation of change for change's sake. We should be cautious and not try to and fix the things that are not broken.

We have tremendous expertise on the City staff, in not-for-profits, and on our Boards and Commissions. The dedicated volunteers and staff that work for years on governmental and non-governmental projects and services deserve our appreciation and respect.

When our community incorporated as a village a century ago, there was a strong sense of community. In the past 100 years that fabric of local government, not-for-profits, schools, houses of worship, recreation, art and culture, historic preservation, parks, and appreciation for nature have only grown stronger.

We are linked together in the life of our community in ways that few places can replicate. We are connected to each other by the time and energy every resident contributes to the life and activities of Rye.

We are a small town, a special place. Our past success has been built on friendship, respect, unity of purpose, and a fidelity to the best interests of Rye. We can best honor the vision of the past 100 years by making it live today in our work together.